

Capacity Development

BRIEFS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FOR LOCAL CAPACITY IN CENTRAL ASIA: The Community Empowerment Network

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In 2002 the World Bank Institute and Europe and Central Asia Region (ECA) launched the Community Empowerment Network (CEN): four national networks linked through regional activities that would build the capacity of communities and development partners to implement community-driven development (CDD) projects. CEN has to date had clear successes as well as difficulties—particularly in linkage to World Bank operations and improving local coordination with multiple donors. CEN's experience points to specific lessons that could be applied in creating other communities of practice, for example, emphasizing peer review among countries and establishing clear indicators of progress as well as a number of specific administrative lessons.

The World Bank has invested millions of dollars in the past decade in knowledge sharing to improve organizational performance. This is based on a belief in the value of “situational” or “social” learning: learning that takes place through informal interaction with other professionals. Such learning is facilitated through informal groups of professionals who have a real need to know what each other knows. Often referred to as “communities of practice,” these groups allow practitioners to find out what works, what does not, and how to solve common problems.

The World Bank has used this approach internally through “Thematic Groups” to strengthen staff capacity, but has only promoted communities of practice in a limited way in client learning programs, chiefly through the World Bank Institute (WBI). WBI has expanded the application of communities of practice beyond organizational boundaries, focusing heavily on cross-national knowledge exchange through new distance learning technologies: videoconferencing, electronic discussions, e-mail lists, and online courses.

One example for which WBI has facilitated networking and knowledge exchange at the regional, national, and community levels is the Community Empowerment Network for Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. WBI and the Europe and Central Asia Social Development unit

(ECSSD) launched the CEN in late 2002 as a community of practice for CDD practitioners.

CEN: A Tool for Scaling up CDD

“Community-driven development” (CDD) is a term used to describe projects that encourage local communities to control the direction of their own development from project conception through implementation and evaluation. Such projects are seen as a way of filling gaps in local service delivery and ensuring these services respond directly to the needs of the poor. Recognizing that projects promoting CDD often demonstrate higher levels of development effectiveness, the World Bank embarked on a program to “scale up” its work in this area. Central Asia was chosen as a pilot subregion for carrying this out in the ECA Region.

In addition to the challenges presented by the still largely centralized, post-communist states, one of the main obstacles to scaling up CDD in Central Asia was the lack of knowledge on how best to implement such projects. Although several CDD projects had been launched in the relatively short time the Bank has been active in the region, not enough time had passed to capture lessons from this experience. In response, WBI and ECSSD initiated CEN in late 2002 to tap the experience of CDD project managers from the Bank, other donor agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and



other institutions to enhance the effectiveness of Bank projects and facilitate the process of scaling up.

The Norwegian government provided initial project funding of \$470,000 for two years. The Japanese, Swiss, and Turkish governments provided additional funding, raising total financing closer to \$700,000 in three years. Although WBI has managed the project, at least one member of each country office has provided local supervision and guidance.

What Is CEN?

The CEN has well-defined goals, networking activities, and guiding principles:

Goals. From the outset, the CEN was intended to build the capacity of communities and their development partners to design and deliver more effective CDD projects that respond to the poor. This goal included efforts to: increase understanding of what makes CDD projects succeed or fail; enhance access to relevant capacity development materials; and enhance coordination among development partners on capacity development activities.

National networks. CEN was designed to provide overall program structure, but only light guidance on

Box 1

Examples of Action Plan Activities

- Monthly newsletters (electronic and print)
- TV trailers highlighting successful community-based initiatives
- Radio programs
- Multilingual websites
- A community-produced national newspaper
- A play for youth
- Customized training for communities in several topics (i.e. social partnership)
- Large national conferences on CDD
- Community-to-community field visits to visit successful projects
- Training communities facilitators
- Community mobilizations manuals

national-level activities. National-level stakeholders received full authority to determine which activities to carry out in each country, helping to build local, group “ownership” and increase the relevance of the activities.

Each national network includes the following:

- *National partner.* A local NGO from each country manages each national network by facilitating development of annual action plans, coordinating implementation of network activities, managing funds, reporting on project activities, chairing meetings, and so on. The national partners for each country are: *Kyrgyz Republic:* Counterpart Sheriktesh; *Uzbekistan:* Business Women’s Association of Uzbekistan; *Tajikistan:*

Counterpart Tajikistan (first partner) and UNDP Communities Program (second partner);

Azerbaijan: Save the Children Azerbaijan (first partner) and Community Development Center (second partner).

- *Steering group.* Using WBI criteria, the World Bank, UNDP, and the national partner selected a multistakeholder group to design and approve the action plan and budget and approve an annual year-end evaluation prepared by the national partner.
- *Action plan.* Each country had broad flexibility in designing its national action plan. The national partner convened the steering group and other relevant stakeholders to generate and distill ideas into a document for debate and approval by the steering group. Box 1 lists some of the activities included in action plans.
- *Mapping exercise.* In the first year, national partners undertook a mapping exercise to identify all international and national groups working on CDD activities. The resulting databases have helped CDD practitioners understand better who is working in their issue area.

Regional networking. To complement national capacity development, WBI has brought the national networks together to share experiences and learn from each other through the following:

- *Monthly videoconferences* on various topics, providing WBI “virtual supervision” of the project and allowing national partners to interact and provide ongoing feedback on project activities
- *Annual conference* at which country delegations share past successes and challenges and strategize for the coming year
- *Regional web site* with content from all four country web sites and other relevant Russian-language web sites
- *E-newsletter* to a range of subscribers to draw attention to web site content and reach audiences with limited web access

Guiding principles. In consultation with CEN partners and stakeholders, WBI developed a set of *guiding principles* to help ensure application of lessons learned from other communities of practice. The following principles were inserted into the activity agreement signed between WBI and each national partner:

- *Local ownership.* CEN stakeholders determine their own priorities and activities in each country, and national partners work to ensure that steering groups and other key stakeholders strongly support action plans.



- *Multistakeholder participation/perspectives.* Community members interact with a variety of stakeholders to meet their needs, so steering groups were designed to represent their diverse views.
- *Linkage to World Bank country activities.* To ensure that CEN supported the ECA Region's efforts to scale up CDD, efforts were made to ensure that each national action plan added value to World Bank country activities.
- *Partnerships to leverage knowledge and resources.* National partners were encouraged to collaborate with other local organizations to deliver specific activities and identify other sources of funding to ensure sustainability.
- *Informal structure.* The CEN was designed as an informal "networking" activity. There are no membership criteria, no special bank accounts, nor by-laws for its operation.
- *Local partnership.* Each of the CEN networks successfully collaborated with other related groups, mainly by sharing responsibilities for action plan activities (and sharing funds), exploiting synergies among groups working in CDD.
- *Building institutional capacity for CDD.* Lacking strong, local CDD capacity development groups, CEN partners in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan became more prominent leaders in this field.

Activities that worked moderately well:

- *Government involvement.* Most of the national networks found it difficult to engage government officials in the CEN, due to lack of interest or antagonism toward CDD and NGOs in general. Cooperation with the Kyrgyz CDF Secretariat was strong, as well as with the Azeri PRSP unit.
- *Regional exchange.* Face-to-face interaction was most successful in facilitating interactions between national networks, whereas videoconferencing inspired less cross-country exchanges, and the e-mail list only saw only modest use.
- *Linkage to World Bank operations.* Despite inclusion of World Bank country staff in each steering group, linkage between CEN and World Bank operations was not as strong as was hoped. Nonetheless, substantial partnerships were formed to support the Kyrgyz Village Investment Project, National Social Investment Fund of Tajikistan, as well as emerging support to the PRSP process in Uzbekistan and the Azerbaijan Rural Investment Project.

Formative Evaluation Results

In June 2004 WBI commissioned consultants Asyl Undeland (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and Shahkruh Makhkamdjanov (Azerbaijan and Kyrgyz Republic) to evaluate the first 18 months of CEN. Some of their key findings apply to all and others to only some of the four countries:

Activities that worked well:

- *Public awareness building.* Via TV trailers, radio shows, and print media, the CEN has provided community members with confidence and ideas for becoming active in local development.
- *Community-to-community knowledge sharing.* Visits among communities helped expose their members to successful projects in other communities and led to replication of several activities in other communities (For an example, see box 2).

Box 2

Community-to-Community Inspiration From Talas to Kant

Counterpart Sheriktesh organized a gathering of around 300 people in the Talas Province from CBOs, local governments, Ayl Okmotu, and Civil Society Support Centers. The group learned about various community-based projects and initiatives in the province. As a result, participants organized their own community-to-community exchange visits using their own resources. Four communities in Kant developed a proposal on networking to address youth problems. The leader of the CBO "Krasnaya Rechka," who participated in the field visit to Talas, decided to launch a microcredit program in her own village. According to her, more than 15 people in the village have obtained credits for the development of small businesses.

Activities that did not work so well:

- *Donor coordination.* The CEN offered an opportunity to alleviate pressure from competing interests and approaches of donors. On the whole, competitiveness among donors and their approaches has not noticeably changed.
- *Objectives and evaluation.* National networks found measurement of progress difficult. Indicators for measuring changes in community activities were not sufficiently established and remain a complicated area for assessing progress.
- *Regular interaction among practitioners.* Due to competing priorities, most international agencies were not as involved in CEN activities as local community members.

Lessons for Better Communities of Practice

Although the CEN operates in a unique subject area and region, the following lessons could still be applied to enhance the effectiveness of CEN and other kinds of communities of practice:

- *Emphasize peer review among countries.*
Although transaction costs may be high, peer review has great value, whether through funding incentives or structured activities. Web and video-conferencing could reduce transaction costs.
- *Focus on national or community organizations and less on busy international agencies.*
Indigenous groups are usually much more eager to take the time to learn from each other. A dynamic working group of local practitioners will likely attract representatives of international agencies. Case studies to examine for lessons on networking among local governments exist in Latin America (i.e., Ayuda Urbana) and East Asia.
- *Establish clear indicators of progress.*
Maintaining interest of members is difficult if they do not see what they are accomplishing. Every effort should be made to measure community development, however difficult. The Bank's Thematic Group Toolkit provides one useful resource for ideas, as does private sector-oriented assessments produced by the American Productivity and Quality Center.

The following lessons emerged from administration of funding and WBI support:

- *Promote flexibility in contracts or agreements* to allow for multiyear implementation and adjustments in activities to reflect changing circumstances.
- *Take a long-term approach to evaluate "social capital" that has been built (i.e., social network analysis).* The impact of communities of practice cannot be measured based on the number of people who participate.

- *Strike a balance between community of practice priority setting and Bank country strategy.*
Although involvement of World Bank country staff is essential, too much may diminish ownership by community members.

In addition, an important, yet elusive issue to examine in future application of communities of practice is cost-benefit analysis. Significant funds are spent on training with a potentially substantial cost for each participant. But, how do communities of practice compare in terms of value for money? Do participants learn more for less? This is a question for future examination. The answer may or may not build an even stronger case for applying this new learning methodology.

Peer Reviewers: Lesley-Ann Shneier, Senior Learning Officer, SECCA and Marsha Olive, Lead Knowledge and Learning Officer, ECAVP

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WBI helps people, institutions, and countries to diagnose problems that keep communities poor, to make informed choices to solve those problems, and to share what they learn with others. Through traditional and distance learning methods, WBI and its partners in many countries deliver knowledge-based options to policymakers, technical experts, business and community leaders, and civil society stakeholders; fostering analytical and networking skills to help them make sound decisions, design effective socioeconomic policies and programs, and unleash the productive potential of their societies.

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